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## Enhancing engagement through a community school approach as the key to increase academic achievement

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### Abstract

An important, but underexplored, determinant to successful academic trajectories is the engagement of pupils in scholastic activities. A lack of school engagement is considered to be an early indicator of a problematic educational career and eventual school dropout. This article examines the added value of a specific community school based learning environment – so called community schools – in secondary education as a means to increase pupils' school engagement and ultimately, their educational achievement. The paper concludes by discussing implications of the findings for research.

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### 1. Introduction

This article presents a review of the current theoretical and empirical literature on student engagement in community schools. It aims to highlight the potential benefits of a community school approach on students' engagement and educational achievement. In doing so, this article starts from the prevailing disparities that influence the unequal outcomes in educational achievement. Disparity in educational achievement can be explained through a range of factors on different levels. One of these factors is individual student characteristics. Individual characteristics (e.g. socio-economic background, ethnicity, gender) are all found to have an impact on students' educational performance. As a consequence, the equitability of schools should be carefully monitored so that students of all backgrounds succeed in developing their talents to their full potential (OECD, 2010).

This unequal educational achievement is reflected, for example, in the growing disengagement of boys. Boys demonstrate lower levels of motivation to study, are more likely to drop out, have lower grades, are less likely to attend higher education and are more likely to repeat a high school year compared to girls (Perkins, Kleiner, Roey &

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Brown, 2004; Buchmann et al. 2008). This can ultimately lead to unequal outcomes towards their future. In order to tackle such inequalities, educators and researchers are increasingly acknowledging the importance of involving a range of partners, including not only students and schools, but also family and community members. Schools are increasingly expected to facilitate the engagement of parents as well as the broader community in order to create an environment where youngsters can flourish (Gold, et al., 2004).

Substantial research effort has been devoted to the possible role of a school for the community for example offering community members a wide range of facilities. Against this, the potential role of community involvement in promoting individual students' educational achievements remains relatively under-explored. Therefore, this article aims to explore the role of a community school approach for students' educational outcomes.

## **2. Student, parental and community engagement**

Student engagement is considered to be an important factor influencing the success or failure of a student's school career. Engagement includes both behavioral and emotional components which refers to acting and feeling engaged (Skinner & Belmont, 1993), facilitating educational performance in the classroom and contributing to students' social and cognitive development (Finn et al, 2000).

Students who feel engaged at school show sustained behavioral engagement in learning activities accompanied by positive emotional tone (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). In addition, they earn higher grades in school, score higher on standardized tests of achievement and show better personal adjustment to school (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Partly because of their higher efforts for school by feeling engaged, it is likely that they will graduate and pursue higher education (Marks, 2000). For example, students select tasks by means of their competencies, they exert intense effort and concentration in the implementation of learning tasks and they show generally positive emotions during ongoing action, such as enthusiasm, optimism, curiosity and interest. Lack of engagement, on the other hand, has a negative effect on students' educational achievement and initiates a downward spiral that may lead to dysfunctional school behavior or even drop out (Finn et al. in Marks, 2000).

Similar findings have been reported regarding the role of parental involvement. For instance, students' educational achievement in school has been found to increase when they feel supported by adults in the school, their home environment and the community. When schools involve the family to support their children, they are more likely to succeed in school and throughout life (Henderdson & Berla, 1994). Studies that correlate levels of parental involvement with increments in student achievement invariably show a positive relationship between involvement and educational performance (Sanders & Epstein, 1998). When parents are involved in different roles throughout school, the performance of all youngsters in the school tends to improve. Making the extra effort to involve families can have an important equalizing effect (Henderson & Beria, 1994). The continuity of family involvement at home appears to have a protective effect on youngsters as they progress through our complex education system. The more families support their children in learning and educational progress, the more their children tend to perform well at school and continue their education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Finally, the community can be seen as a setting for social interactions and increase experiences by learning in real life. Using the community as a learning tool helps students apply what they learn at school to their daily lives (Blank, et. al., 2004). Understanding these dimensions of a community helps to notice the possible influences of educational environments on student development, including how the social climate, the school as well as other institutional settings affect student performance, aspirations and attitudes towards school and other behavioral and cognitive outcomes (Marks, 2000).

### 3. Understanding the community school approach

#### 3.1. Defining community school

A definition of a community school is not easy to formulate. Not one community school is alike. We refer to the Coalition for Community Schools, an alliance of national, state and local organizations in education, youth development, community planning and development, family support, health and human services, government and philanthropy as well as national, state and local community school networks. The Coalition for Community Schools describes a community school as follows; “*A community school is both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources with an integrated focus on academics, health and social services, leadership, and community involvement*” (Blank et al., 2004).

However, the main focus of a community school depends on the local context and the goals they want to achieve (Nicaise, 2008). Every community school has its own focus, but the central idea, i.e. improving the (non)-academic development of a child, remains central. A community school approach differs on local, national, and even on international level. We also find similar initiatives, albeit under a different names, for example, ‘community schools’ in the United States; ‘fritidspedagog’ in Sweden, ‘extended schools’ in the UK, and ‘broad schools’ in Belgium. The community school approach developed simultaneously in several countries, each with its own central focus (Nicaise, 2008). For example, in the United States and the UK, the focus is on the relationship with the surrounding neighborhood (Blank, et al., 2004). In Belgium, on the other hand, the impact of community schools on the educational achievement of students tends to be emphasised. Despite the variety of definitions, a number of constitutive elements of a community school approach can be identified. These will be discussed in the next paragraph.

#### 3.2. Constitutive elements of a community school approach

As mentioned above, the concept of a community school has been defined in a number of different ways. Four aspects, however, are found as the common denominators: First, a community school can be introduced to reevaluate a disadvantaged community; second, education has a social function and contributes to the development of interpersonal and bodily-kinetic intelligence (Gardner, 2010), third, a community school addresses the needs of students by creating a broad “life and learning” environment that gives the opportunity for students to getting involved and feeling engaged on different levels and fourth, it can involve the community to improve student educational achievement;

In relation to the first, a community school can be introduced to reevaluate a disadvantaged community where the neighbourhood can be seen as an important contributor to education and a community school. A community school aims to improve both the community and school by serving the neighbourhood. A community school represents the broad community around the school, which consists not only of the youngsters but also their parents and the neighbourhood as a whole. The neighbourhood in itself is therefore regarded as a valuable factor in relation to learning and school success (Gelsthorpe, 2006)

The second aspect refers to social function of education. It's the community school's task to enrich the opportunities to students instead of focusing exclusively on the cognitive components (Nicaise, 2008). Learning doesn't happen exclusively in the classroom but in a variety of learning and living situations such as in youth clubs or project work (Desmedt et al., 2008). The third aspect refers to the needs of students by creating a broad “life and learning” environment that gives the opportunity for students to feel engaged on different levels. Desmedt and colleagues argued that the whole child approach that refers to the concept of life-wide learning. In addition, it is important that learning is not only stimulated by youngsters and adolescents, but that teachers, parents, adults, scholars are also constantly challenged to continue to gain new knowledge and learn new skills" (Desmedt et al,

2008). Finally, the fourth aspect refers to improving the educational achievement of students' through a community school approach. To maximize motivation and educational achievement for all students, schools need to provide supportive learning contexts for diverse students (Alfassi, 2002).

One of the common denominators of all the constitutive elements of a community school approach is the idea of partnerships between different sectors. A community school facilitates collaboration between different sectors including one or more schools that work together on a broad learn and living environment for all youngsters during their leisure -and school time (Joos, & Ernalsteen, 2010). A community school also offers support as well as a range of opportunities such as day care, family supporting activities for youngsters, youth, families, and members of the communities before, during, and after school (Blank et al., 2004).

Working on a broad "learn and live" environment by creating maximum opportunities for the development of all youngsters and young people requires broad collaboration between various sectors who are involved in the education of youngsters and youth (SGOK b, 2008; Joos et al., 2006).

A community school, therefore, is regardless of their main focus, organized by partnership between the school, the (local) community and the family, with a focus on the question of "how to create the conditions that enable every child to succeed" rather than on "how to provide all youngsters with schooling"(Blank et al., 2004).

### *3.3. The aim and evolution of a community school*

The aim or construct of a community school as mentioned above is different from a traditional school. It is argued that traditional schools, whose main focus lies on the cognitive component of learning, are not fully capable of dealing with challenges associated with raising and educating youngsters. Research suggests that many features of traditional schooling are ineffective and possibly detrimental for the less successful student. In traditional schools, students are expected to adapt to the norms and demands of the school. Those who cannot keep up are placed in remedial settings where the focus is on their deficits and weaknesses. In contrast, community schools aim to build upon individual and community strengths and capacities and are therefore considered to be more adequate in responding to youngsters' needs (Heers et al., 2000).

There is no explicit answer about the main reason why the community schools were introduced. Three different generations of community school approaches have been identified. The first generation focused on reducing underachievement and increasing the chances of development of all youngsters in disadvantaged communities (Pirard et al., 2004). The main aim was initially to combat inequalities and to create equal opportunities for specific disadvantaged groups. Gradually the aim of community schools has been expanded towards the development of wider facilities and more leisure time opportunities. Second generation community schools focused on the broad development of all youngsters, irrespective of their background, by providing social services to all youngsters (Pirard et al., 2004). The main aim was to give youngsters who could not participate in organized (leisure) activities the possibility to participate in such activities. This was considered as a conscious investment in the future of youngsters (Van der Sword, 2008). The third generation of a community school, as we know it out today, aims to expand those opportunities to all residents of the neighbourhood.

In recent years, there has been recognition of five profiles of a community school. Depending on its purpose, a community school can assume one or more profiles. The purpose of the first profile is to prevent or eliminate arrears in education and to provide equality in education. The second profile emphasizes the 'enrichment' of the development of youngsters through various indoor and extracurricular activities by providing opportunities in and around school. The third profile focuses on the contribution of a school to the social cohesion in the neighbourhood, while the fourth profile aims to create a community school (care) network for youngsters and their parents in and around school (Nicaise, 2008). Finally, the fifth profile provides day care and activities during that time (Leclercq, 2006).

The wide variety of profiles often results in confusion about the potential outcomes of community schools. This is partly due to two divergent expectations of the community school approach. First, there is the expectation that it increases students' educational performance, reflecting the main purpose of the first generation of community schools. Second, there is the expectation that the approach has more effect on the quality of care facilities in general. Possibly, this refers more to the second and third generation community schools. In this perspective, the learning performance is less important (Studulski, 2007). Yet, the benefits of a community school depend to a large extent on the profile they assume.

#### 4. Potential outcomes of a community school approach

The potential of a community school approach can be examined on three levels: the *macro* level, reflecting the effects of a community school on the society as a whole; the *meso* level, including the potential outcomes of a community school approach at the level of the neighbourhood or community and; the *micro* level, reflecting the effects of a community school approach on the educational achievement of students. An analysis of twenty community school initiatives cross the United States (Blank et al., 2004), for example, found a positive impact on all levels. First, the research indicated that students who participated in such initiatives had higher levels of educational performance (micro level). Second, their families felt more involved with the school and demonstrated a greater sense of responsibility for their children's learning (meso level). Third, the community school approach created a more positive school environment and greater community support (meso level). Finally, the community school's neighbourhood enjoyed an increased sense of security and better rapport with students and residents. The community school initiatives were also found to promote better use of school buildings, with improved accessibility for neighbourhood residents. Outcomes on the macro level were wide-ranging, including high-quality early learning programs, effective family and community involvement, and better services for special populations, such as children with disabilities and English language (Blank et al., 2004).

While there is a large number of studies focusing on the meso and macro-level, the amount of documented assessments and evaluation studies that specifically focuses on the impact of community schools on students' educational performance is relatively small. Educational outcomes are not easy to measure (Studulski, 2007). Nevertheless, there are some studies about the effect on intermediate goals on children's educational development. Intermediate goals can be defined as creating opportunities for children to develop in a broad sense. For example, schools offering structured after school activities by creating partnerships in the neighbourhood.

A study, The National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988, in the United States suggests that youngsters who involve themselves in positive and structured after school activities are more likely to make personal investment in school than those who are not spending their leisure time on structured and constructive out of school activities. Interaction with peers who share similar goals in an after school activity can encourage and inspire students to do well in school and develop their interest in future educational and career pursuits (Jordan & Nettles, 2000). In addition, the participation on non-academic activities gives youngsters the opportunity to also interact with adults as well. This interaction gives students a positive impact on educational outcomes. Spending more time in adult-guided learning activities correlates to higher test scores (Jordan & Nettles, 2000).

A study in Holland, at the SCO-Kohnstamm-institute, also suggests that youngsters enjoy exploring their capacities and being good at something. They become more social with other youngsters, have more self-confidence and more self-control. Research assumes that their need for knowledge increased, their attention to the wellbeing of the group had more priority than their individual concerns. They showed signs of better team spirit, were giving and receiving more appreciation, had the opportunity to experience some successes and were building a more positive self-image (Pirard et al. 2004).

The introduction of the live and learning environment had a positive effect on students both as people and in class. It is however important that participation on these non-academic activities offered and taken up without obligation. Associating broad learning with pleasure gives students the desire to participate and learn (Joos & Ernalsteen, 2010).

Finally, positive outcomes on student wellbeing and engagement are expected by the community school approach, which is considered as an indirect indicator to measure a successful educational career (Pirard et al., 2004).

## 5. Conclusion

There is a large number studies focusing on the effects of a community school on the society as a whole and the potential outcomes of a community school approach at the level of the neighbourhood or community. However, the amount of documented assessments and evaluation studies that specifically focuses on the impact of community schools on students' educational performance is relatively small. Nevertheless, a community school approach is expected to have positive outcomes on student wellbeing and engagement.

In this article we have explored the potential of a community school approach on student engagement. Student engagement is considered to be an important factor influencing the success or failure of a school career. Achieving recognition for the importance of engagement hopefully creates an environment that anticipates on it. While the practice field has shown how a community school approach can anticipate on students' engagement, policies in several countries are just beginning to recognise the potential of this approach.

However, there is a clear need to conduct more research on the potential of a community school approach on student engagement and how we can create an environment that anticipates on it. At the same time, there is also a need to develop strategies for a school policy to accomplish an environment where youngsters can flourish. Social policies can promote a community school approach in a number of ways, notably by creating a broad learn and life environment and ensuring greater use of facilities around the neighbourhood. This may involve a range of different interventions, such as creating partnerships with facilities around the school and involving the family and neighbourhood in to the school.

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